

History
by Mary M. Courtney

Memories, like breath in the cold night air, disappear too quickly, a vapor that clings to the lips for a moment and then vanishes. Like a kiss, but less substantial. Less painful? No, not really. Finn shook his head. I'm becoming a philosopher, he thought. Sitting on the cold stone bench in the square, Finn breathed out the vapor of his memories, shoving his hands deeper into the pockets of his thin wool coat. It was October, and the afternoons were growing cooler.

Paul Revere glanced down at him from atop the bronze horse he had ridden for more than a hundred years now, since the statue had first been erected. For a moment Finn imagined that the bronze horse might rear up and leap from the pedestal, galloping off into the night as he had on that long ago occasion. In his vision, the horse had fiery red eyes and snorted steam from its nostrils as it pawed the air with menacing bronze hooves, a patriotic avenger. He shook his head at the absurdity of his thoughts and put it down to one too many late nights reading fantasy novels. Emily often laughed at him about his love of reading. Books filled every available corner of their tiny house; he couldn't sit on the couch without pulling a book from between the cushions, couldn't lay his head on his pillow at night without feeling the comforting solidity of a book beneath it. He'd even found an old battered copy of Hemingway's short stories in the refrigerator the other day, unsure of how or why it was in there; maybe his memory was going. Books filled every shelf and table top of his house, and every spare corner of his heart and mind--at least those not occupied by his wife. Even now, he held a book on his lap, open at the page where his thoughts had begun to wander and abandon it.

He looked down at the book. *The Odyssey*, an ancient story. He had read it before, but never tired of the idea that, over two thousand years ago, some long dead scribe had meticulously captured the tale as a storyteller wove the spell of words around his audience. In his mind, he was there, listening raptly. Words, to him, were thoughts and places, and he could travel anywhere, even into another man's mind, through words. He could even travel through history. He didn't travel much himself, had never physically been to the places he read about. Maybe he should go somewhere, he mused, plan a trip to Ancient Greece. He and Emily had often talked about it.

Glancing down the square toward the old church, he looked for Emily. She always appeared in the same spot, just around the corner, just next to the old church. He often imagined that if he stared at the spot long enough, she would materialize, and sometimes, it had worked. But not today. Another of his fanciful wanderings, which occurred far too often as he sat here with only his thoughts for company. He had spent many hours on this bench through the years, waiting for her, lost in thought. He usually brought a book for company, but lately, he liked to just sit and think, and remember. His heart always sped up when he first saw her, in that brief moment before she looked up and caught his eye. That moment was his alone, and he didn't want to miss it because his nose was buried in a book. She would appear around the corner, walking toward him from the church, wearing some improbably bright dress or hat or scarf. And he would hold his breath until she smiled at him. At him: quiet, ordinary, bookish him. Philosopher him. He loved those moments.

This was their bench. It was where they had first met on that fateful, wonderful morning so many years ago, when he had first seen her walking toward him and he had first held his breath, knowing that he couldn't take another one, couldn't let this moment escape him, without speaking to the girl

in the yellow dress. After that, he made a habit of sitting on the bench just so he could be there when she walked by, just so he could say hello and start up a conversation, and one day, offer her a flower and invite her for a cup of coffee. Since he chanced on the right flower, she agreed. The coffee turned into dinner, and dinner turned into afternoon walks, and the walks turned into a lifetime together.

Their first kiss had been on this very bench, beneath an impossibly blue autumn sky. He had been holding her hand, marveling that something so strong could be so soft. An unexpected flurry of wind had pulled at the branches of the maples in the square, and they had suddenly found themselves laughing in a snowglobe of yellow leaves. And then, he had kissed her. Yellow leaves, swirling through his memory, catching in her long black hair, landing on her dress. Yellow, Emily's favorite color. Now he sat here with a bouquet of yellow flowers for her, resting on the bench next to him. Black-eyed Susans, her favorite. *Rudbeckia hirta*. Of course he knew the scientific name; he liked that sort of knowledge, and to him, it sounded beautiful and no less romantic. Poetic even. He looked at the flowers on the bench next to him and leaned back, an almost hidden thought suddenly tickling at the recesses of his mind. A poem.

What was that old poem? About the flowers, and the lovers? He had looked it up when he and Emily had first started dating, wooing her with sweet words and his knowledge of her favorite plant. Black-eyed Susan, and sailors.... The lines came to him suddenly and clearly then, like the voice of an old friend out of the past, and he quietly recited them in a whisper to the wind and the trees around him.

*“All in the downs, the fleet was moor'd,
The streamers waving in the wind
When Black-Ey'd Susan came aboard,
Oh! where shall I my true love find!
Tell me, ye jovial sailors, tell me true,
If my Sweet William sails among the crew.”*

He smiled. Before Emily, he hadn't been the type of man to quote poetry, but after Emily, he couldn't stop. He had tried to woo her with lines from William Shakespeare and Pablo Neruda, and at one point, what he considered a very sensual e.e. cummings poem. He had even once, very poorly, tried writing his own verse, although he had never admitted to it and never shown it to Emily. But she had dubbed “Sweet William's Farewell to Black-Eyed Susan” the greatest love poem of all time. John Gay, that was the poet's name, he suddenly recalled. Good memory, no failing. After Finn had recited the poem to her, Emily had taken to sometimes calling him “Sweet William,” and now he grinned at the thought. It was when she called him Sweet William that he truly felt the depth of her love.

She had planted sweet Williams and black-eyed Susans together in their tiny backyard, all because of that poem. She had spent hours in that garden, coaxing beauty out of the earth, turning their small little corner of the world into a monument to their love and a centuries old poem. She certainly hadn't shown any interest in gardening before hearing those lines, at least not that he knew of. But seeing her surrounded by those flowers, where she seemed most content, always lightened his heart. She was so beautiful when she was in the garden, covered in dirt and grass stains and a

sense of contentment. Beautiful. *“Every beauteous object that I view / Wakes in my soul some charm of lovely Sue...”* Another line from that poem. He smiled, shaking his head. His memory was as strong as ever, even though he was getting older and physically felt it. She had been right about that poem; it was the greatest love poem of all time. It was their love poem. Now he wondered at his luck at stumbling upon not only the right flower but just the right verse to win her over. *Lovely Sue*. *Lovely Emily*. *Emily*. He tasted the name in his mouth, rolling the syllables around slowly like a sip of wine. He drew the name out: *Emily*. Three syllable names were the loveliest, he thought. He continued whispering the poet’s words, a hushed performance, for no one in particular:

*“O Susan, Susan, lovely dear,
My vows shall ever true remain;
Let me kiss off that falling tear;
We only part to meet again.
Change, as ye list, ye winds; my heart shall be
The faithful compass that still points to thee.”*

He smiled a quiet smile, both at the man he had become--one who recited poetry to himself on a park bench--and at the romanticism of it all. Okay, he had to admit, the sentiment was beautiful. And sad. But that was what Emily loved: beautiful, sad things. Old crumbling ruins, lost forgotten places, abandoned buildings covered in moss and vines...echoes from the past.

Finn looked up at the statue once more and recalled another, very different, line of verse from a childhood history book, *“One if by land, two if by sea.”* Paul Revere’s ride: a moment in time, like many other moments, that could have disappeared into obscurity so long ago. Yet here it remained, immortalized in bronze before him. Paul Revere and his midnight ride. Larger than life. It was impressive. Some men were meant to be immortalized, he supposed, and others forgotten. He knew that he would be one of the forgotten men, but that was okay. His was a good life. He needed no monument.

It was getting dark; the first stars were beginning to show themselves across the deepening twilight as he looked down the street once more, past the statue, toward the church. He and Emily had been married in that church. She had insisted on it. Well, to be fair, he hadn’t put up too much of a fight, he thought, chuckling to himself. He was a romantic at heart; she brought that out in him. She had been so beautiful on their wedding day, radiant, and he had marveled at the fact that she had chosen him. They had been married for seventeen years.

He looked up again at Paul Revere, and his horse, who no longer seemed ready to leap to fearsome life. Just a statue. He thought once more about the “two if by sea” line. Someone had lit those two lanterns on that long ago night, dispelling the shadows of revolution. He couldn’t remember the man’s name, wasn’t sure he’d ever known it. Another forgotten name--well, mostly forgotten, because his actions, at least, if not his name, were still remembered. Now streetlights, not lanterns, were starting to illuminate the square, and more than just two of them. Dispelling the darkness. Was life defined by darkness, or by light? Neither, he thought--although of late, the darkness had started to creep in to his thoughts, to cast ever lengthening shadows over his contentment. He feared those shadows, and shivered at the thought. Light and dark, hope and loss: they were his

constant companions. But, he scolded himself, he was getting maudlin, sitting here in the gathering gloom, and it was time to go. He didn't want to be late.

Finn looked back down the square. It was never completely empty, but it was quiet at this hour. He had waited long enough; it was time to go find Emily. Tucking his book under his arm and picking up the flowers, he stood, and stretched. Leaving the bench and the square and Paul Revere behind, he began walking, passing the church with all its history. He stepped off the pavement and entered the field beyond, moving out of the glow of the street lamps into the dampness of the grass. The sky had darkened to a deep indigo, and a scythe moon hung low in the sky as he reached the spot under the tree.

“Emily.” He spoke her name into the night, like the note of a song. Then, as was his custom, he held his breath, waiting for that glorious moment when she would look up and smile at him. But it never came.

Crouching down, he placed the flowers on the ground and touched the cool granite face of the tombstone, as if caressing a cheek. He leaned his forehead against the stone and closed his eyes, running the fingers of his left hand over the name engraved there. Emily. Three syllables, and lovely. Still lovely.

After a long silent moment, he stood to leave.

Then he exhaled.